MARJORIE LIU
SANA TAKEDA
MONSTRESS
ISSUE 22
WINNER OF FIVE 2018 EISNER AWARDS

THE MONSTRESS STORY SO FAR...

Maika Halfwolf averted certain apocalypse by closing a breach between the Known World and the realm that houses the long-imprisoned Monstra. But there is no rest for the weary, and Maika immediately faced a new challenge: tracking down her young friend, Kippa, whose betrayal by their fellow companion, Ren, had led to her kidnapping. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before Maika herself was kidnapped, attacked and drugged by her old foe, Yvette Lo Lim, and a group of strangers in red robes.

When Maika awoke, she learned that her captor was her biological father, the last eye-marked descendant of the Shaman-Empress and the leader of the red-robed figures, who worship the Shaman-Empress's bloodline. This Blood Court has formed in secret, prepared to enter the fray and ascend to power when the Known World slips back into open warfare. In their employ are some of the greatest War-Masters of this or any age, ready to serve the Blood Court's cause. But Maika does not trust this father she never knew, not least because he surgically attached a prosthetic arm to her body without her consent.

Meanwhile, Kippa managed to slip away from her own kidnappers by diving into the cave of the Tomb of Baru. One of her captors, Yafaela, followed Kippa into the cave's depths, and now, as Kippa begins to manifest the supernatural powers of her Arcanic gift, the two are searching for a way out of a place from which no living being has ever returned.

THE PLAYERS...

MAIKA An Arcanic teen who survived the Great War, and slavery at the hands of the Cumaean witch nuns. Ruthless and haunted, she is determined to uncover the truth behind her mother's murder — and her mother's secrets — in the hope that she can free herself from an ancient and dangerous god called a Monstrum that is imprisoned inside her body and fills her with an otherworldly hunger for human flesh.

ZINN A mysterious, primordial Monstrum of tremendous power that shares Maika's body and mind, and fights her for control. Once considered a god, and drawn into this world by the Shaman-Empress, this Monstrum is driven by a deadly hunger, consuming the lives of humans and Arcanics alike, leaving only their desiccated corpses behind. Though it may give the impression that its only wish is to survive, there's far more to this creature, and its desires, than meets the eye…

KIPPA An Arcanic fox girl saved from slavery by Maika. Innocent and optimistic, she is frightened by the Monstrum — but trusts Maika and will bravely defend her and others by rushing into battles too dangerous for a child.

REN An enigmatic nekomancer cat with mysterious motives, he is one of Maika's companions on her journey, and perhaps an agent of the Dusk Court — or some greater power.

YVETTE LO LIM A Cumaean adventurer who was complicit in the death of her one-time friend, Moriko Halfwolf, during an expedition to find the Shaman-Empress's tomb. Maika spent years tracking down Yvette, seeking both revenge and answers about her mother's death, but every attempt to kill her has met with failure. Yvette long possessed a fragment of the Shaman-Empress's mask, which allowed her limited access to the realm of the Monstra but also drove her mad.

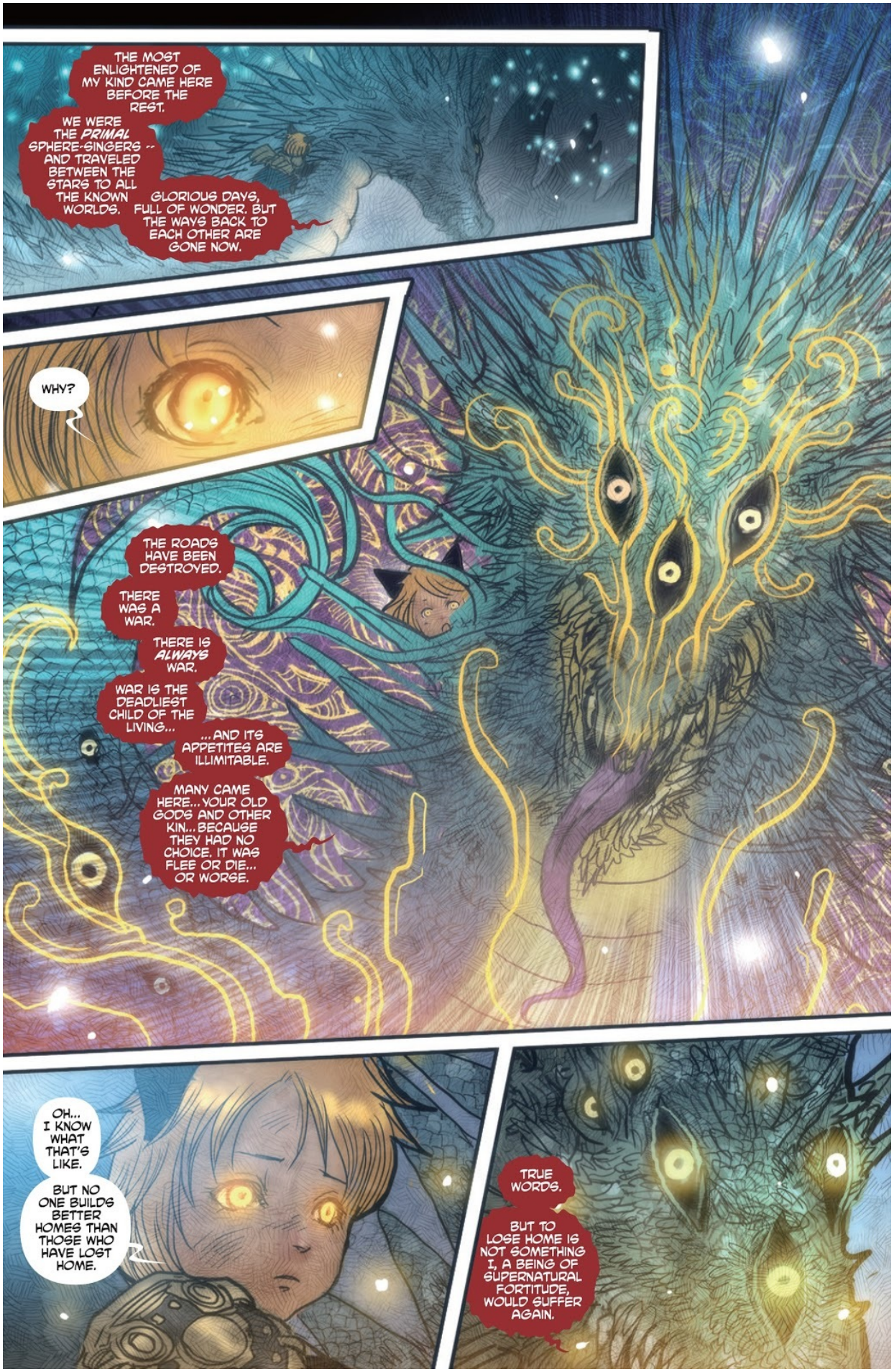
GET AWAY FROM US, BROTHER-FUCKERS! GET THE FUCK BACK OR I'LL FUCKING CHOP YOUR HEADS OFF!
AND THEN SHIT ON YOU!
I'M SO DEAD.
NO, YOU'RE NOT.
OH, GODDESS, I SHOULD HAVE STAYED AT THE CALLIGRAPHY ACADEMY.
I WAS SO GOOD WITH A BRUSH. THE BEST IN A GENERATION... THAT'S WHAT MY MASTER SAID.
I EVEN WON A GOLD CLAW AT THE HUNDRED POETS FESTIVAL!
SO WHY DON'T YOU GO BACK?
WHY? BECAUSE I'M EVEN BETTER AT HUNTING PEOPLE.
I'M SO, SO DEAD.
I WAS SUPPOSED TO DELIVER YOU BY NOW.
YOU MIGHT AS WELL TELL ME WHY I WAS TAKEN.

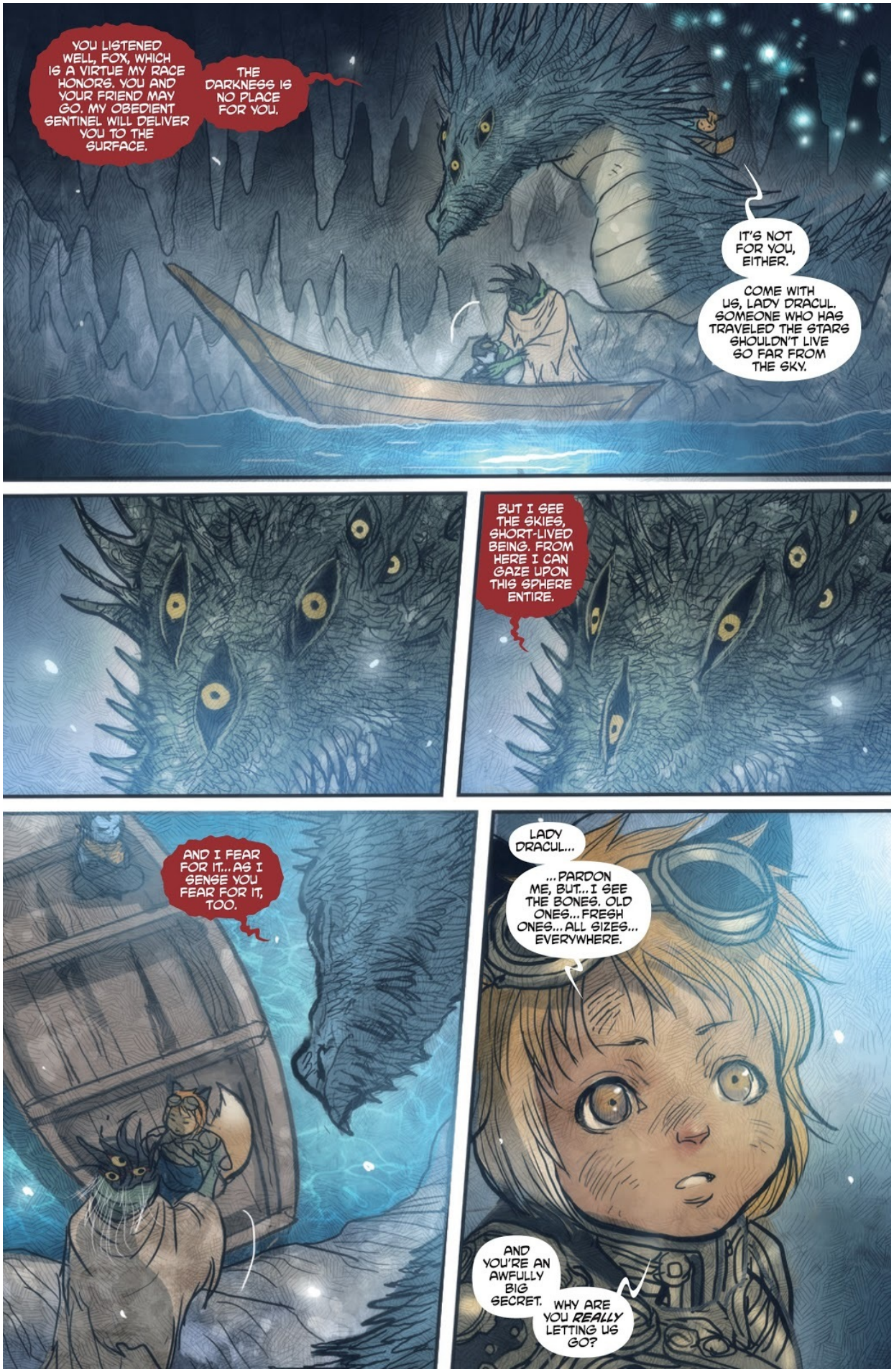
SPEARS AND DAGGERS, YOU THINK I KNOW?
THE DOCTOR SAYS GET, I GET. YOU DON'T ASK QUESTIONS OF HIM. NOT UNLESS YOU WANT TO END UP IN LOTS OF PIECES.
JUST MY LUCK, I'M GOING TO DIE ON ENOUGH TREASURE TO PAY FOR A NEW LIFE. ANCIENT GOLD, ANCIENT INVENTIONS.
ALL OF IT BELONGS TO THE CREATURE I SAW. I THINK IT WAS A DRACUL.
A DRACUL? THOSE ARE MAKE-BELIEVE.
THIS ONE SEEMED REAL.
I WISH I'D SEEN MORE OF IT. I THINK IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN BEAUTIFUL.
WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU? ARE YOU TOO STUPID TO BE AFRAID?
NO.
THIS JUST ISN'T THAT BAD.
IT IS CERTAINLY FAR WORSE FOR ME, HAVING STRANGE, SHORT-LIVED BEINGS IN MY HOME WHO STINK OF DEATH.
OH... FUCK...

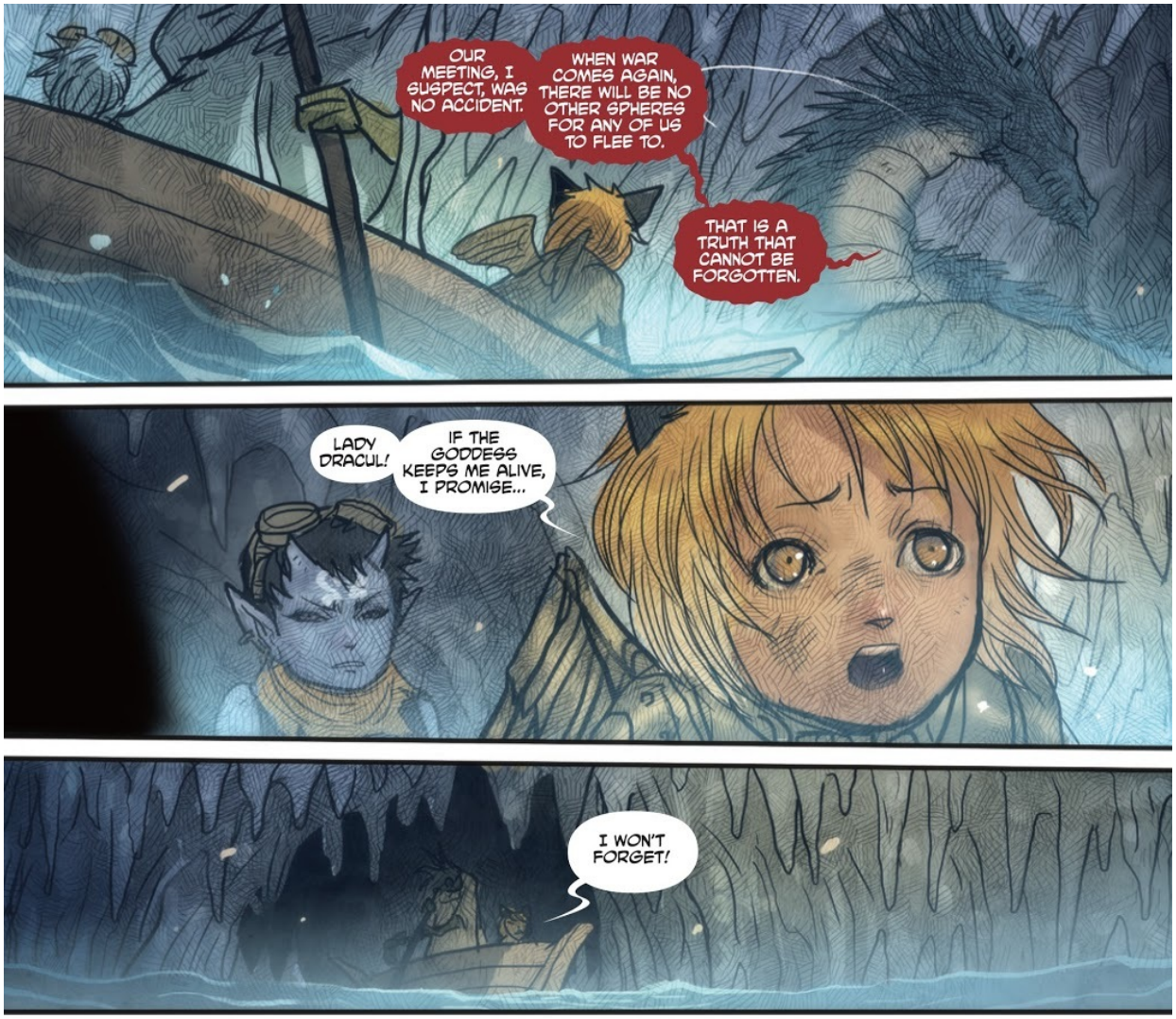
...FUCK... FUCK... FUCK...
:GASP:
OH! YOU ARE A DRACUL, AREN'T YOU?
I DO NOT KNOW *ALL* THE NAMES YOU TINY CREATURES HAVE GIVEN MY *MAGNIFICENT* RACE.
DRACUL? PERHAPS.
I AM FLATTERED WE MIGHT BE REMEMBERED ENOUGH TO *HAVE* NAMES.
THE POETS REMEMBER.

BUT THE DRACUL I'VE HEARD ABOUT ARE SUPPOSED TO BE PEACEFUL. GODDESS-BLESSED. THEY DON'T KILL.
...HUNGRY...
...SO JUICY...
MY KIND STRIVE NOT TO KILL... VIOLENCE IS THE FIRST IMPULSE OF THE WOUNDED AND THE UNINSPIRED, AND WE... DRACUL... ARE NEITHER.
...GODDESS...
...NEED NEW BODIES...
NO, MY SENTINELS. HANDS TO YOURSELVES, PLEASE.
PAY NO MIND TO MY DECAYING FRIENDS...
THEY ARE NOTHING MORE THAN LOST CREATURES... THEY WILL DO YOU NO HARM, UNLESS YOU REQUIRE IT.
THEY LOOK FAMILIAR TO ME. LIKE THE OLD GODS, BUT SMALLER.
FOX GIRL! SHUT UP!
THE ONLY GODS I WORSHIP LOOK NOTHING LIKE THESE SENTINELS... THANK THE STARS.
YOU MUST BE REFERRING TO THEIR TEDIOUS, VAINGLORIOUS PROGENITORS, WHO KEPT THEM AS SLAVES.
=HUFF=
=HUFF=
=HUFF=
DON'T HURT HER. SHE'S NOT BAD, DEEP DOWN.
DON'T HURT HER?!
IN MY EXPERIENCE THE ALMOST-GOOD ARE NEARLY ALWAYS AS MALIGN AS THE ALL-EVIL.
STOP PRETENDING YOU UNDERSTAND THAT THING!
I'M NOT PRETENDING! CAN'T YOU UNDERSTAND HER?
YOU'RE CRAZY!

DO NOT FRET OVER YOUR DELICIOUS-SMELLING FRIEND'S CONFUSION.
NO SIMPLE MORTAL CAN UNDERSTAND MY EXTRAORDINARY, MELLIFLUOUS TONGUE.
AND, IN FAIRNESS, FEW ANCIENTS CAN EITHER.
BUT I'M JUST A FOX.
A FOX-MORTAL. AND MORE.
LET GO!
LADY DRACUL!
CALM YOURSELF, SHORT-LIVED BEING. SHE WILL NOT BE HARMED... YET.
COME.
YOU SPEAK OUR TONGUE... BUT ARE YOU WISE ENOUGH TO KNOW OUR LORE?
I... DON'T THINK SO.
THEN ALLOW ME TO DILATE.
WE... THE GREATEST BEINGS ON THIS SPHERE... ARE IN FACT NOT OF THIS SPHERE.
JUST AS THOSE YOU CALLED THE OLD GODS ARE STRANGERS HERE AS WELL.
WE ARE KIN, HOWEVER... VERY DISTANT... BUT SONG-SIBLINGS NEVERTHELESS.


THE MOST ENLIGHTENED OF MY KIND CAME HERE BEFORE THE REST.
WE WERE THE *PRIMAL* SPHERE-SINGERS -- AND TRAVELED BETWEEN THE STARS TO ALL THE KNOWN WORLDS.
GLORIOUS DAYS, FULL OF WONDER. BUT THE WAYS BACK TO EACH OTHER ARE GONE NOW.
WHY?
THE ROADS HAVE BEEN DESTROYED.
THERE WAS A WAR.
THERE IS *ALWAYS* WAR.
WAR IS THE DEADLIEST CHILD OF THE LIVING...
...AND ITS APPETITES ARE ILLIMITABLE.
MANY CAME HERE... YOUR OLD GODS AND OTHER KIN... BECAUSE THEY HAD NO CHOICE. IT WAS FLEE OR DIE... OR WORSE.
OH... I KNOW WHAT THAT'S LIKE.
BUT NO ONE BUILDS BETTER HOMES THAN THOSE WHO HAVE LOST HOME.
TRUE WORDS.
BUT TO LOSE HOME IS NOT SOMETHING I, A BEING OF SUPERNATURAL FORTITUDE, WOULD SUFFER AGAIN.


YOU LISTENED WELL, FOX, WHICH IS A VIRTUE MY RACE HONORS. YOU AND YOUR FRIEND MAY GO. MY OBEDIENT SENTINEL WILL DELIVER YOU TO THE SURFACE.
THE DARKNESS IS NO PLACE FOR YOU.
IT'S NOT FOR YOU, EITHER.
COME WITH US, LADY DRACUL. SOMEONE WHO HAS TRAVELED THE STARS SHOULDN'T LIVE SO FAR FROM THE SKY.
BUT I SEE THE SKIES, SHORT-LIVED BEING. FROM HERE I CAN GAZE UPON THIS SPHERE ENTIRE.
AND I FEAR FOR IT... AS I SENSE YOU FEAR FOR IT, TOO.
LADY DRACUL...
...PARDON ME, BUT... I SEE THE BONES. OLD ONES... FRESH ONES... ALL SIZES... EVERYWHERE.
AND YOU'RE AN AWFULLY BIG SECRET.
WHY ARE YOU *REALLY* LETTING US GO?

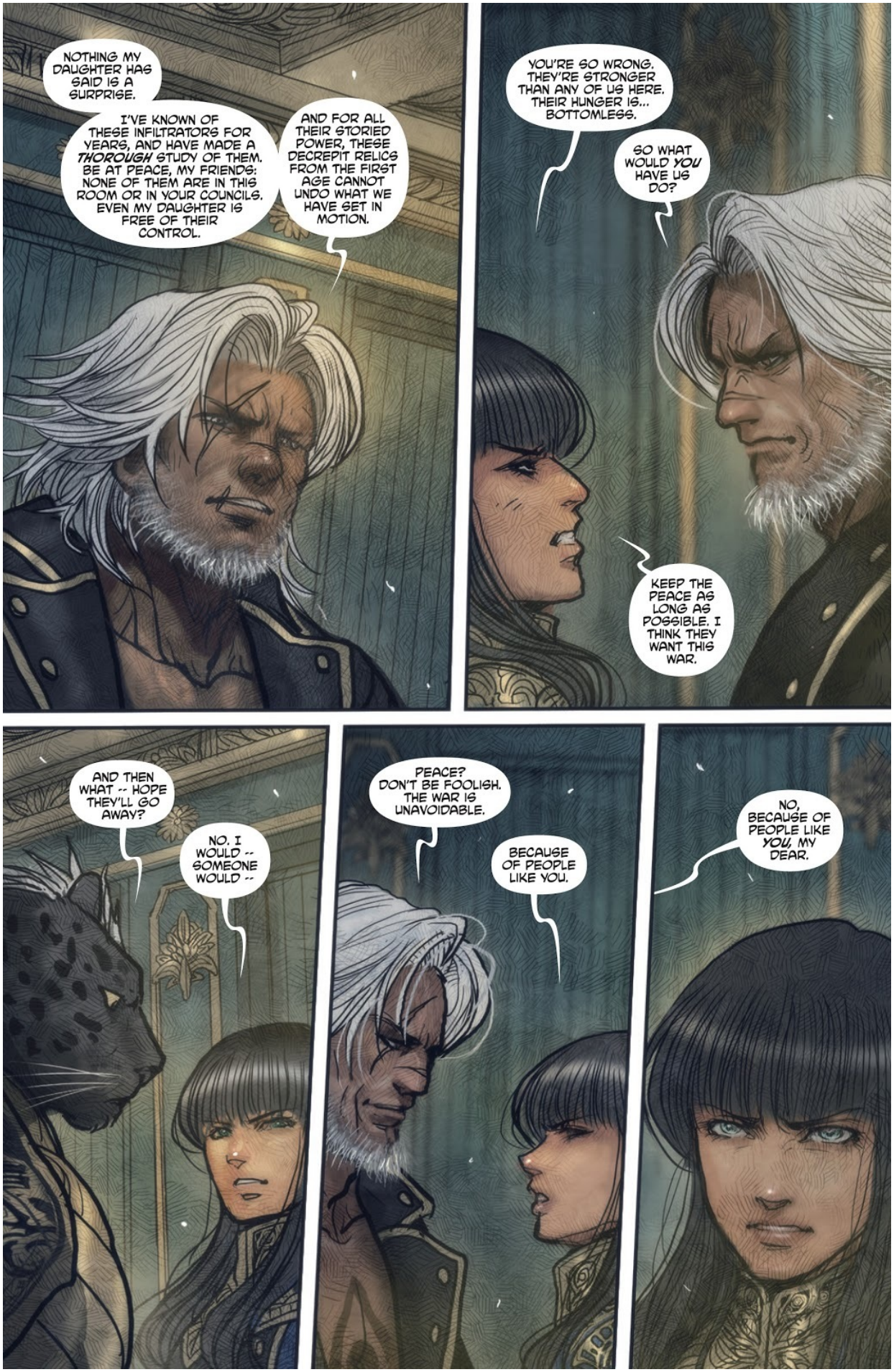

OUR MEETING, I SUSPECT, WAS NO ACCIDENT.
WHEN WAR COMES AGAIN, THERE WILL BE NO OTHER SPHERES FOR ANY OF US TO FLEE TO.
THAT IS A TRUTH THAT CANNOT BE FORGOTTEN.
LADY DRACUL!
IF THE GODDESS KEEPS ME ALIVE, I PROMISE...
I WON'T FORGET!
¿PFFT¿... SEE THE SKY?
I WOULD NOT GO BACK UP THERE IF MY FUCKING LIFE DEPENDED ON IT.
TOO... DAMNED... DANGEROUS.

WHEN THE WAR ERUPTS WE SHOULD STRIKE EACH SIDE UNDER FALSE FLAGS, BLEEDING THEM IN TURN, DEEPENING THE CHAOS --
ALL WELL AND GOOD, HAPPO, BUT BEFORE DECIDING OUR STRATEGIC COURSE, SHOULD WE NOT DISCUSS THE NEW ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE DUSK AND DAWN COURTS?
I THOUGHT THAT A FALSE RUMOR, NEN-THESTRA. MISINFORMATION.
IT IS NOT A RUMOR, COMMANDER KASPIAN. MY SOURCES ARE EXACT. THIS IS THE FIRST SUBSTANTIVE ARCANIC PACT SINCE THE SCHISM.
OF LITTLE CONCERN.
PERHAPS, LORD DOCTOR.
STILL, WE SHOULD NOT DISMISS THIS UNION OUT OF HAND. I'M TOLD THE DUSK COURT GAVE UP THEIR *BARONESS.*
THE ALLIANCE WON'T LAST. IT CAN'T, IF THE *BARONESS* IS AMONGST THEM.
PERHAPS THE WARLORD WAS FOOLED -- HER SPYCRAFT WAS ALWAYS WEAK -- BUT THE QUEEN OF WOLVES?
HOW COULD *SHE* NOT KNOW THE DANGER POSED BY THE BARONESS?

THIS BARONESS SURE GETS AROUND.
WHO IS SHE?
THE TITLE IS FLUID, LADY HALFWOLF. PASSED DOWN FROM MASTER TO APPRENTICE. BUT THE BARONESS IS, ABOVE ALL ELSE, A SUBVERSIVE WEAPON, A SECRET DRAGON.
ASSASSIN. SABOTEUR. DIPLOMAT --
-- BEST FRIEND, LOVER...
WHOMEVER THE DUSK COURT NEEDS, THE BARONESS BECOMES. HER LOYALTY TO THEM IS UNASSAILABLE... AS IS HER RUTHLESSNESS.
IF THE BARONESS IS EMBEDDED WITH THE DAWN, WE SHOULD EXPECT AN INTERNAL UPSET, A SHIFT IN POWER.
THE DUSK COURT WOULD NOT HAVE SENT HER THERE FOR LESS.
LET THE FOOLS TEAR EACH OTHER APART. WE SHOULD BE MORE CONCERNED WITH THE FEDERATION. THEIR FORCES HAVE OVERWHELMING NUMERICAL ADVANTAGE.
AND THE CUMAEAN ENGINEERS ARE NO FOOLS. THEIR WEAPONS HAVE ONLY GOTTEN DEADLIER.

IT'S NOT THEIR NUMERICAL OR TECHNOLOGICAL SUPERIORITY THAT WORRIES ME. DESPITE THE THREAT OF WAR, THERE'S A GROWING SENTIMENT IN THE FEDERATION FOR PEACE WITH THE ARCANIC COURTS.
THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THOSE WHO ARGUE FOR PEACE AND THE CUMAEANS, WHO ONLY EVER CLAMOR FOR WAR, HAS BECOME VOLATILE.
THOUGH I AM ONLY AN OBSERVER, MIGHT I ADD THAT THE FEDERATION NAVY HAS QUIETLY ORDERED MOST OF ITS FLEET OUT TO SEA... AWAY FROM CUMAEAN CONTROL...
...AND MY SPIES HAVE HEARD THAT A SECRET ENVOY HAS BEEN DISPATCHED TO CONSTANTINE TO OPEN NEGOTIATIONS WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF THE DUSK COURT.
THE CUMAEA HAVE AGREED TO THIS?
THE CUMAEA DO NOT KNOW.
I ASSURE YOU THERE WILL BE NO PEACE BETWEEN THE FEDERATION AND THE ARCANICS.
ASSURANCES ARE EASY, LORD DOCTOR.
I GUARANTEE IT THEN.
AND WHAT GUARANTEES ARE THERE AGAINST THE IMPOSSIBLE?
DOUBT IT NOT, MY FRIENDS, THE IMPOSSIBLE *HAS* HAPPENED. AN OLD GOD, A MONSTRUM, HAS BREACHED OUR WORLD...
...AND IT WAS *NOT* A GOD OF LOVE *OR* PEACE.
PONTUS IS IN CHAOS, COUNTLESS WERE DRIVEN MAD TO THE POINT OF CANNIBALISM -- AND THE BREACH LASTED MERE MINUTES. THE NEXT TIME IT HAPPENS? WHAT THEN?
LET *ME* TELL YOU WHAT WILL HAPPEN.
IF THE OLD GODS FREE THEMSELVES, THERE WILL BE NO GUARANTEES, NO ADVANTAGE, NO CONSPIRACIES, NO ARCANICS, NO FEDERATION.
ALL WILL BE DEVOURED.
ALL.

PONTUS IS THE LEAST OF OUR CONCERNS.
SOME OF THE OLD GODS ARE ALREADY AMONG US. I'VE SEEN THEM WITH MY OWN EYES.
THE CUMAEAN MOTHER SUPERIOR IS A HOST FOR ONE OF THEM. SAME WITH THE INQUISITRIX WHO CAME LOOKING FOR ME. I'M SURE THERE'S MORE.
THEY POSSESS PEOPLE AND HIDE INSIDE THEIR SKINS. THEY COULD BE ANYONE. WHO'S TO SAY ONE OF *YOU* HASN'T BEEN POSSESSED? OR AN ANCIENT IN THE DUSK OR DAWN COURTS?
THEY'RE NOT HERE BECAUSE THEY ENJOY THE COMPANY, EITHER. THEY WANT TO FREE THE REST OF THEIR KIND.
THAT'S THE *REAL* WAR. ALL THIS OTHER TALK... IS BULLSHIT.
FORGIVE ME, BUT I'VE BEEN TOLD *YOU* HAVE AN OLD GOD LIVING BENEATH *YOUR* SKIN.
HOW DOES THAT MAKE YOU DIFFERENT FROM THE CUMAEAN INFILTRATORS? WHY WOULDN'T THE OLD GOD INSIDE *YOU* CONSPIRE WITH THE OTHERS TO DESTROY US?


NOTHING MY DAUGHTER HAS SAID IS A SURPRISE.
I'VE KNOWN OF THESE INFILTRATORS FOR YEARS, AND HAVE MADE A *THOROUGH* STUDY OF THEM. BE AT PEACE, MY FRIENDS: NONE OF THEM ARE IN THIS ROOM OR IN YOUR COUNCILS. EVEN MY DAUGHTER IS FREE OF THEIR CONTROL.
AND FOR ALL THEIR STORIED POWER, THESE DECREPIT RELICS FROM THE FIRST AGE CANNOT UNDO WHAT WE HAVE SET IN MOTION.
YOU'RE SO WRONG. THEY'RE STRONGER THAN ANY OF US HERE. THEIR HUNGER IS... BOTTOMLESS.
SO WHAT WOULD *YOU* HAVE US DO?
KEEP THE PEACE AS LONG AS POSSIBLE. I THINK THEY WANT THIS WAR.
AND THEN WHAT -- HOPE THEY'LL GO AWAY?
NO. I WOULD -- SOMEONE WOULD --
PEACE? DON'T BE FOOLISH. THE WAR IS UNAVOIDABLE.
BECAUSE OF PEOPLE LIKE YOU.
NO, BECAUSE OF PEOPLE LIKE *YOU,* MY DEAR.

THAT, PERHAPS, DIDN'T GO AS YOUR FATHER PLANNED... BUT IT WAS AN IMPORTANT CONVERSATION.
HE'S NOT MY FATHER.
SO SAID EVERY UNHAPPY DAUGHTER EVER.
I STABBED MINE WHEN I WAS TEN. SADLY, HE LIVED TO BE A VERY OLD MAN.
YOU CAN DETECT THESE IMPOSTERS, YES? YOU CAN TELL WHO IS REAL AND WHO IS NOT?
MAYBE *NOW* I'D KNOW THE SIGNS. BUT I CAN'T BE CERTAIN.
BUT DIDN'T YOUR LORD DOCTOR SAY THAT NONE OF YOU ARE POSSESSED? DON'T YOU TRUST HIS SAGE, *ALL-KNOWING* WISDOM?
AS THE POETS SAY, VICTORY IS A PAIR OF TWINS NAMED BOLDNESS AND CAUTION.
OR, AS MY MOTHER USED TO SAY, CAREFUL NEVER KILLED ANYONE.
CAUTIOUS OR SCARED? BECAUSE AFTER PONTUS, I'M SCARED SHITLESS. AND NOTHING THE LORD DOCTOR OR ANY OF YOU HAVE SAID HAS MADE ME LESS SCARED.

UNDERSTAND, HALFWOLF, THAT NONE OF US BETRAYED OUR OATHS LIGHTLY. WE CAME TO YOUR FATHER, INDIVIDUALLY, IN OUR TIME, BECAUSE OF DREAMS, ORACLES, PORTENTS... ALL WITH THE SAME DREADFUL MESSAGE...
OUR WORLD IS DOOMED, AND THERE WOULD BE NO WAY FORWARD EXCEPT THROUGH HIM... NO WAY TO SURVIVE EXCEPT THROUGH THE EYE OF THE EMPRESS.
LET ME KNOW HOW THAT WORKS OUT.
I'M SURE ALL WILL KNOW SOON ENOUGH.
WHAT IS THAT?
IT'S *ADYJE* -- THE SILENT LANGUAGE.
I WAS TELLING MY COLLEAGUES SOMETHING.
DOES THIS MEAN ANYTHING TO YOU?
THAT'S FROM AN OLDER SYSTEM. ONE OF THE FIVE ADMONISHMENTS.
IT MEANS *"TRUST ONLY BLOOD."*
WHAT IF YOU HATE YOUR FAMILY?
DON'T BE TOO LITERAL WITH THESE OLD LANGUAGES. THE ACTUAL MEANING IS CLOSER TO *"TRUST ONLY THOSE WHO BLEED FOR YOU."*

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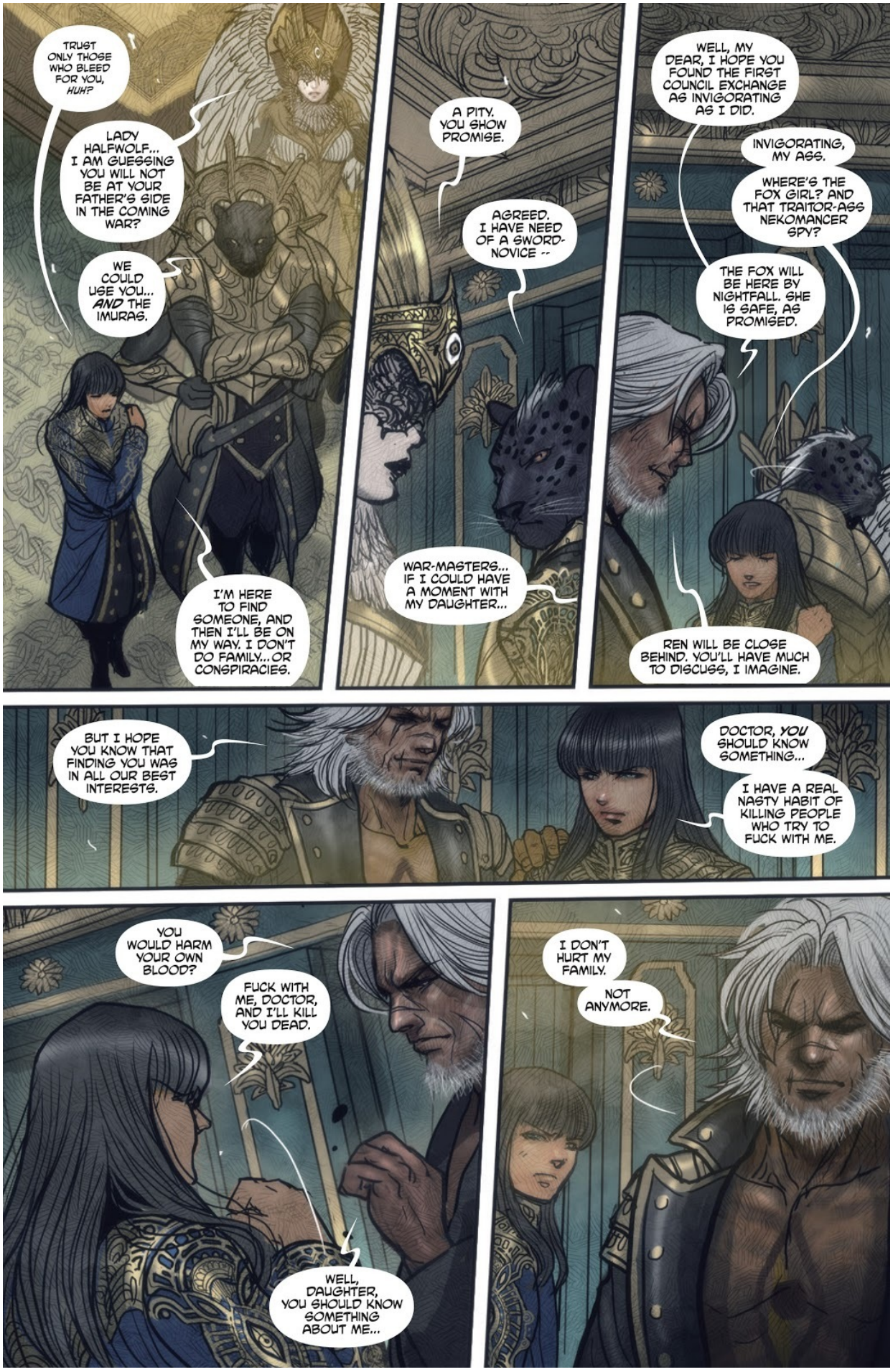
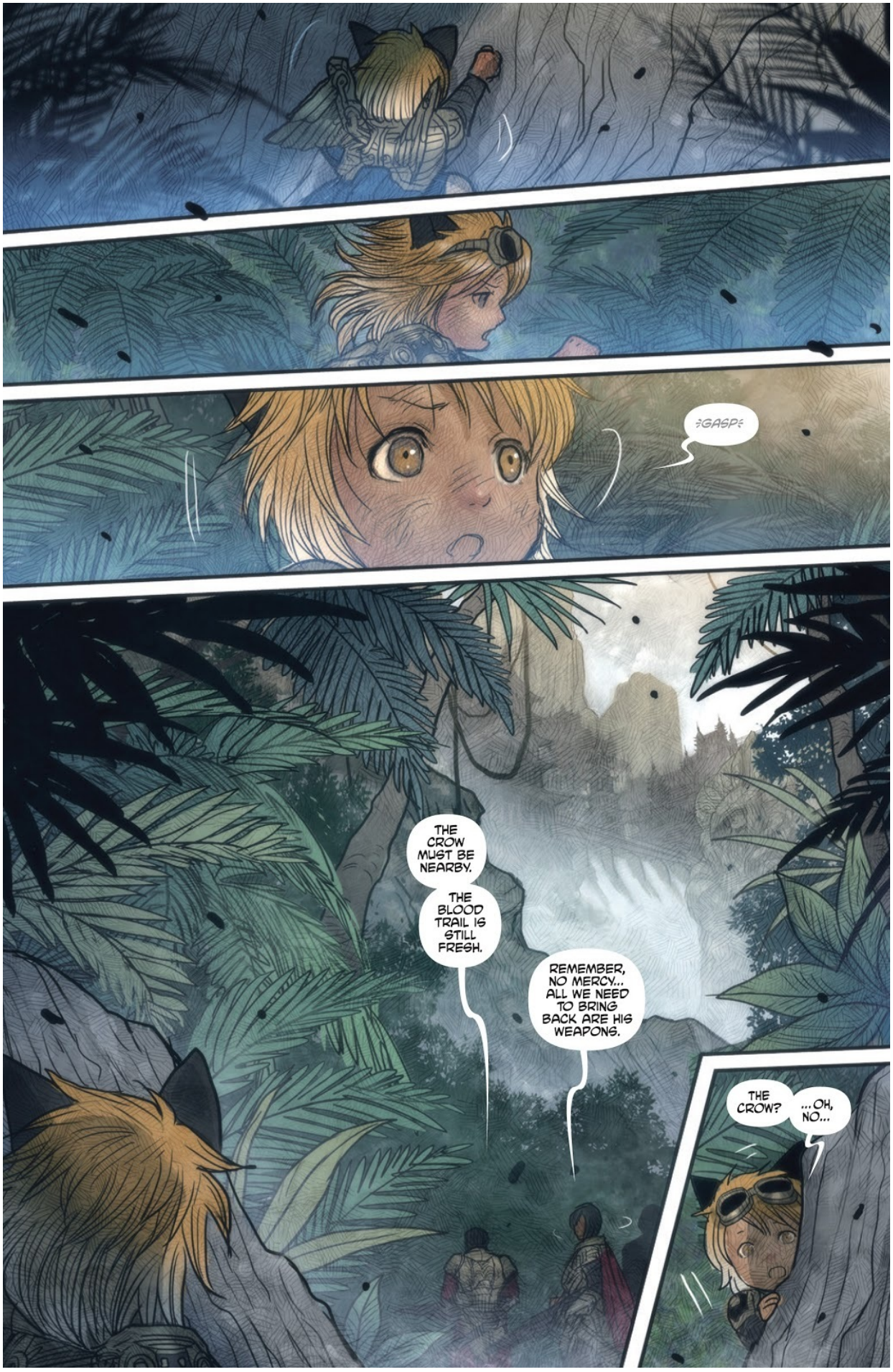
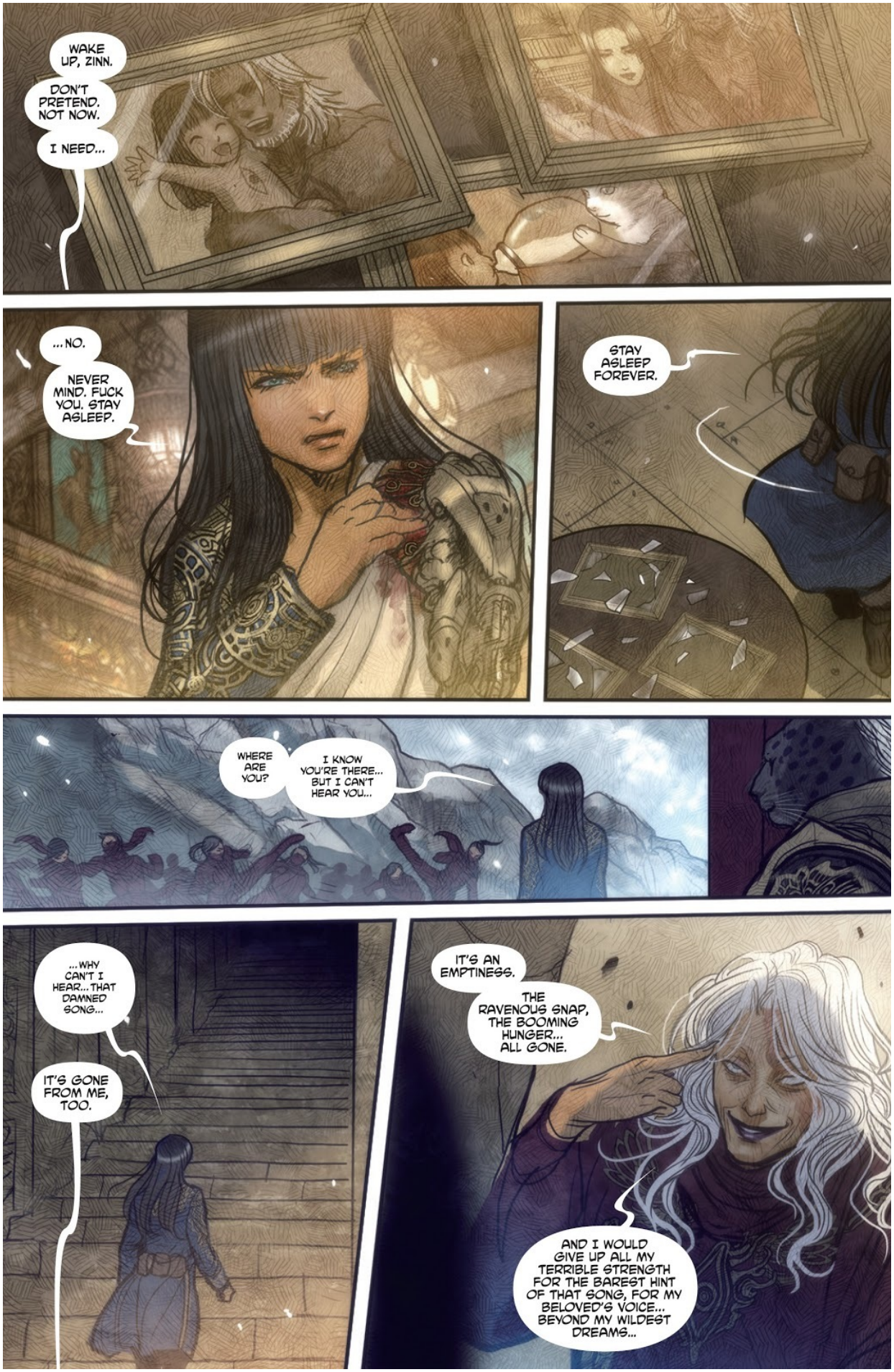
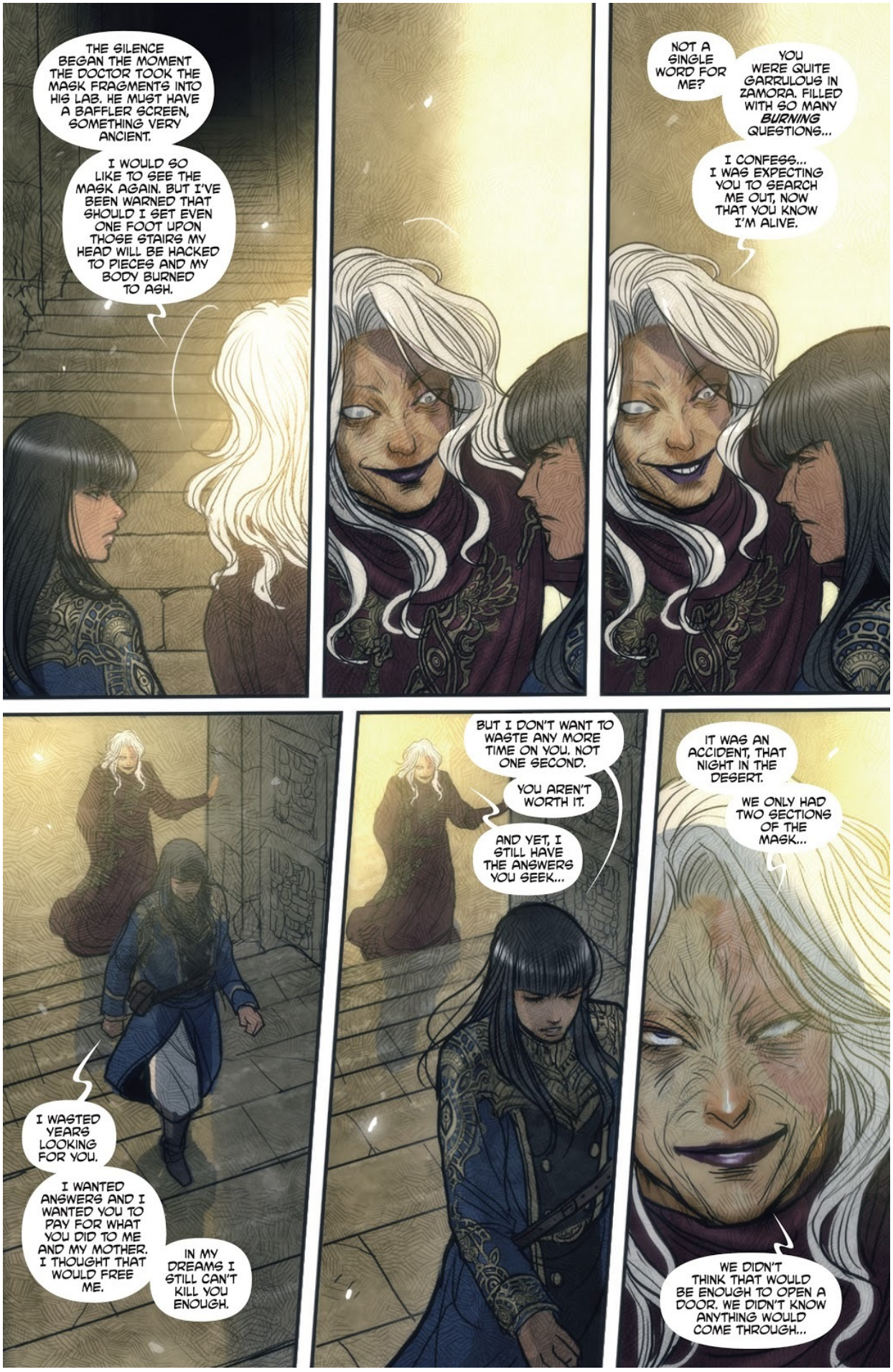

TRUST ONLY THOSE WHO BLEED FOR YOU, HUH?
LADY HALFWOLF... I AM GUESSING YOU WILL NOT BE AT YOUR FATHER'S SIDE IN THE COMING WAR?
WE COULD USE YOU... AND THE IMURAS.
I'M HERE TO FIND SOMEONE, AND THEN I'LL BE ON MY WAY. I DON'T DO FAMILY... OR CONSPIRACIES.
A PITY. YOU SHOW PROMISE.
AGREED. I HAVE NEED OF A SWORD-NOVICE --
WAR-MASTERS... IF I COULD HAVE A MOMENT WITH MY DAUGHTER...
WELL, MY DEAR, I HOPE YOU FOUND THE FIRST COUNCIL EXCHANGE AS INVIGORATING AS I DID.
INVIGORATING, MY ASS.
WHERE'S THE FOX GIRL? AND THAT TRAITOR-ASS NEKOMANCER SPY?
THE FOX WILL BE HERE BY NIGHTFALL. SHE IS SAFE, AS PROMISED.
REN WILL BE CLOSE BEHIND. YOU'LL HAVE MUCH TO DISCUSS, I IMAGINE.
BUT I HOPE YOU KNOW THAT FINDING YOU WAS IN ALL OUR BEST INTERESTS.
DOCTOR, YOU SHOULD KNOW SOMETHING...
I HAVE A REAL NASTY HABIT OF KILLING PEOPLE WHO TRY TO FUCK WITH ME.
YOU WOULD HARM YOUR OWN BLOOD?
FUCK WITH ME, DOCTOR, AND I'LL KILL YOU DEAD.
WELL, DAUGHTER, YOU SHOULD KNOW SOMETHING ABOUT ME...
I DON'T HURT MY FAMILY.
NOT ANYMORE.

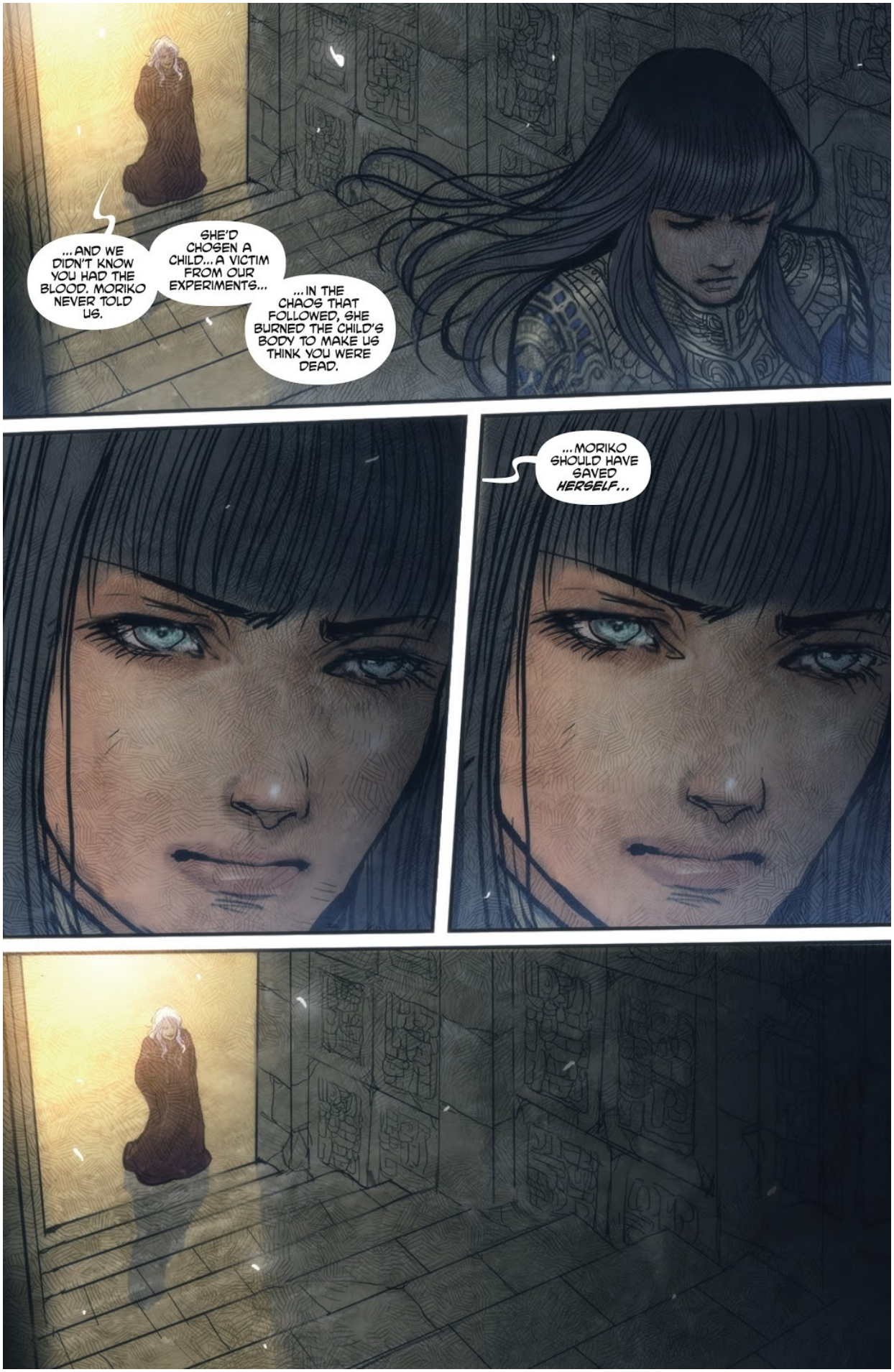
UM, MISS MONSTER?
THE LADY DRACUL SAID YOU'RE NOT TO HURT US, RIGHT?
WELL, I COULD USE A FAVOR, IF YOU DON'T MIND...
COULD YOU NOT LET HER OFF THE BOAT RIGHT AWAY?
WHAT?
THANK YOU!
FOX! COME BACK!
SWORDS AND SPEARS, I'M GONNA KILL YOU!


GASP!
THE CROW MUST BE NEARBY.
THE BLOOD TRAIL IS STILL FRESH.
REMEMBER, NO MERCY... ALL WE NEED TO BRING BACK ARE HIS WEAPONS.
THE CROW?
...OH, NO...

LORD CORVIN!
KIPPA?
WHAT ARE YOU... NEVER MIND... JUST RUN...
...SOLDIERS... HUNTING... ME...
I SAW THEM... THEY'RE CLOSE...
STAY HERE, PLEASE.
I'LL LEAD THEM AWAY.


WAKE UP, ZINN.
DON'T PRETEND. NOT NOW.
I NEED...
...NO.
NEVER MIND. FUCK YOU. STAY ASLEEP.
STAY ASLEEP FOREVER.
WHERE ARE YOU?
I KNOW YOU'RE THERE... BUT I CAN'T HEAR YOU...
...WHY CAN'T I HEAR... THAT DAMNED SONG...
IT'S GONE FROM ME, TOO.
IT'S AN EMPTINESS.
THE RAVENOUS SNAP, THE BOOMING HUNGER... ALL GONE.
AND I WOULD GIVE UP ALL MY TERRIBLE STRENGTH FOR THE BAREST HINT OF THAT SONG, FOR MY BELOVED'S VOICE... BEYOND MY WILDEST DREAMS...


THE SILENCE BEGAN THE MOMENT THE DOCTOR TOOK THE MASK FRAGMENTS INTO HIS LAB. HE MUST HAVE A BAFFLER SCREEN, SOMETHING VERY ANCIENT.
I WOULD SO LIKE TO SEE THE MASK AGAIN. BUT I'VE BEEN WARNED THAT SHOULD I SET EVEN ONE FOOT UPON THOSE STAIRS MY HEAD WILL BE HACKED TO PIECES AND MY BODY BURNED TO ASH.
NOT A SINGLE WORD FOR ME?
YOU WERE QUITE GARRULOUS IN ZAMORA. FILLED WITH SO MANY *BURNING* QUESTIONS...
I CONFESS... I WAS EXPECTING YOU TO SEARCH ME OUT, NOW THAT YOU KNOW I'M ALIVE.
I WASTED YEARS LOOKING FOR YOU.
I WANTED ANSWERS AND I WANTED YOU TO PAY FOR WHAT YOU DID TO ME AND MY MOTHER. I THOUGHT THAT WOULD FREE ME.
IN MY DREAMS I STILL CAN'T KILL YOU ENOUGH.
BUT I DON'T WANT TO WASTE ANY MORE TIME ON YOU. NOT ONE SECOND.
YOU AREN'T WORTH IT.
AND YET, I STILL HAVE THE ANSWERS YOU SEEK...
IT WAS AN ACCIDENT, THAT NIGHT IN THE DESERT.
WE ONLY HAD TWO SECTIONS OF THE MASK...
WE DIDN'T THINK THAT WOULD BE ENOUGH TO OPEN A DOOR. WE DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING WOULD COME THROUGH...


...AND WE DIDN'T KNOW YOU HAD THE BLOOD. MORIKO NEVER TOLD US.
SHE'D CHOSEN A CHILD... A VICTIM FROM OUR EXPERIMENTS...
...IN THE CHAOS THAT FOLLOWED, SHE BURNED THE CHILD'S BODY TO MAKE US THINK YOU WERE DEAD.
...MORIKO SHOULD HAVE SAVED *HERSELF*...

KRNCH
DO NOT TROUBLE YOURSELF OVER OLD STORIES FROM A DEMENTED WITCH.
I WOULD BE LESS TROUBLED IF I REMEMBERED MORE.
THOSE PHOTOS OF US...
...I WAS AT LEAST TWO OR THREE YEARS OLD.
YOU WERE TWO.
SOON AFTER, YOUR MOTHER STOLE YOU FROM ME.
SHE AND I HAD... IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES CONCERNING HOW YOU SHOULD BE RAISED.
MAYBE SHE WAS AFRAID YOU'D CHANGE YOUR MIND AND KILL ME. JUST TO SEE IF THE OLD GOD RETURNED TO YOU.
IS THAT WHAT YOU THINK I HAVE PLANNED FOR YOU NOW?
I'M SURE IT'S CROSSED YOUR MIND.
IN THE PAST I MIGHT HAVE CONSIDERED IT...
BUT I HAVE LEARNED TO VALUE FAMILY ABOVE ALL ELSE.

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WELCOME TO MY SANCTUM, DAUGHTER.
GODDESS... WHAT...
IT IS A DREAM, A RECORDED MEMORY...
I FOUND THE TECHNOLOGY MANY YEARS AGO IN ONE OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS'S LABORATORIES.
YOU ARE WITNESSING THE ANCIENTS, IN THEIR PRIMAL YOUTH...
...LIVING IN ONE OF THEIR LOST CITIES.

I LIKE TO WATCH IT SOMETIMES. FOR INSPIRATION.
CHNK
WE USED TO LIVE AMONG THE STARS. WE ONCE HARNESSED THE POWER OF SINGULARITIES AND EVEN DEFIED TIME.
HOW FAR WE HAVE FALLEN!
THIS WAS USED BY THE DUSK COURT TO IMPRISON ME.
I ASSURE YOU IT ISN'T THE SAME SARCOPHAGUS. AND IT IS NOT FOR YOU.
THIS ONE HAS ALREADY BURNED OUT. SADLY THEY CAN ONLY BE USED ONCE.
COME. I HAVE YOUR BELONGINGS.

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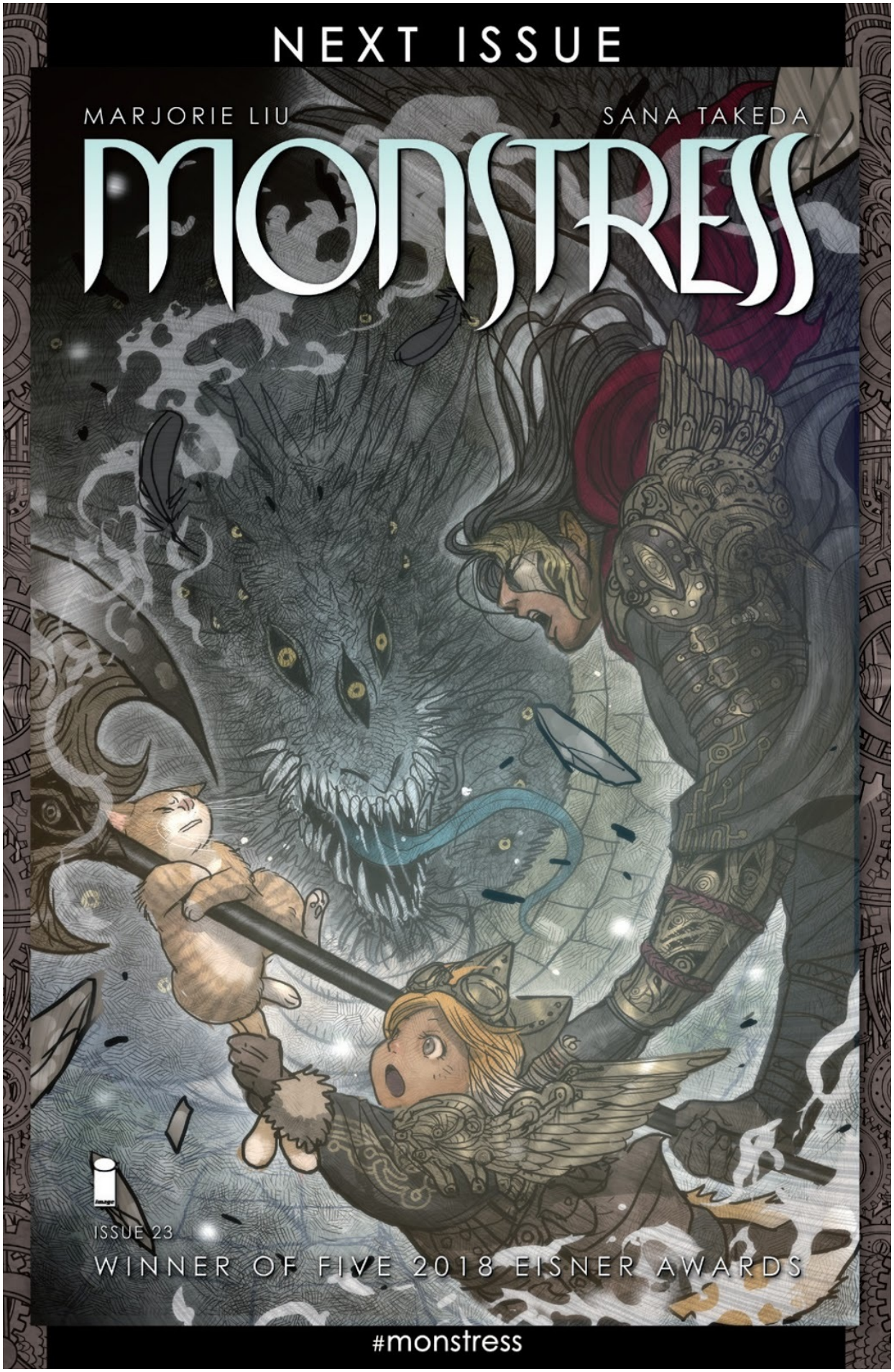
THOSE MASK FRAGMENTS NEED TO BE DESTROYED.
THIS WAR YOU'RE PREPARING WON'T MEAN TWO SHITS IF THE OLD GODS GET FREE.
AND YET IT HAS NOT ESCAPED ME THAT YOU HAVE WORRIED MORE ABOUT THE FOX CHILD THAN ABOUT THE MASK.
I WAS, FRANKLY, EVEN MORE ASTONISHED THAT YOU WOULD LET THE PIECES OUT OF YOUR GRASP. I FIND YOUR DISINTEREST IN OUR INHERITANCE... DISTRESSING.
YOUR MOTHER SACRIFICED ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING TO SECURE THESE ARTIFACTS. AND HERE YOU ARE, UNCONSCIOUSLY OR NOT, TRYING TO SPURN WHAT SHE HAS BEQUEATHED YOU.
AS THE POETS SAY: IT IS THE CURSE OF THE YOUNG TO SQUANDER WHAT THEIR ELDERS DIED TO POSSESS.
THE MASK CAN ONLY BE DESTROYED WHEN IT IS ASSEMBLED... BUT I WOULD DO NO SUCH THING EVEN IF I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY.
AS I PROMISED, HOWEVER, THE FRAGMENTS ARE YOURS TO DISPOSE OF AS YOU WILL.
TAKE THEM. THOUGH I SUSPECT IN YOUR DEEPEST HEART YOU WOULD RATHER LEAVE THEM HERE WITH ME.
...IT'S TRUE... I AM AMBIVALENT...
...BUT... WHAT... THE... FUCK...
...IS THAT DOG... DOING HERE...?
OH... DIDN'T I SAY I WAS STUDYING THE INFILTRATORS?

"A VERY EXHAUSTIVE STUDY, INDEED."
TO BE CONTINUED...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SANA TAKEDA
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MONSTRESS™ ISSUE 22

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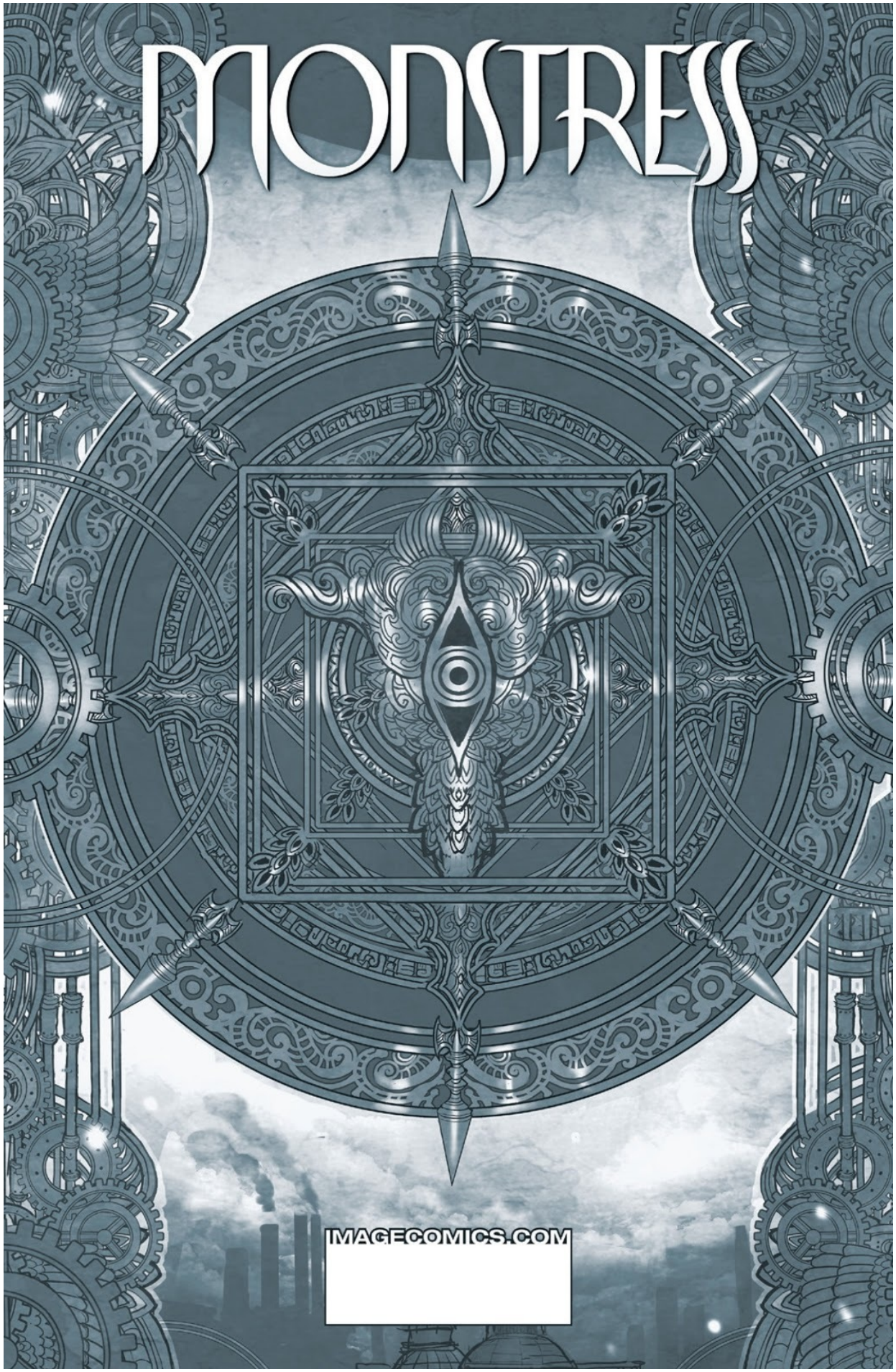
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